

Title: From ‘wickedity’ to tameness? Reflections on the application of critical realism to researching higher education

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Abstract

This paper will be jointly authored and will draw on the reflections and experiences of two researchers in South African and English higher education contexts in which they teach. Responding to Trowler’s (2009: 1) *Think Piece*, the authors will examine their ‘application of theory to close up research’, explicating their experiences of undertaking research influenced and guided by the ontological meta-theory of critical realism, both to steer methodology and illuminate analysis during their doctoral research.

The focus of both doctoral studies was discourse in higher education. One study examined the role of discourse in the complex constitution of knowledge in a higher education teaching and learning context embedded in a workplace in South Africa; the second investigated understandings and influences on academics’ conceptions of continuing professional development in higher education in England. The former study thus explored teaching and learning in a higher education context that is greatly influenced by its workplace setting; the latter is more ‘inwardly’ focused on the university as a site of work and development. As such, both topic areas can be seen to hold the properties of ‘wickedity’ (Bore and Wright, cited in Trowler 2009), being potentially ill-defined, complex and multi-faceted. This paper will illustrate how, in both research projects, the explicit underpinning of critical realism not only provided a philosophical orientation to the research site and participants but enabled the research process to be robust, evolving with ‘tameness’, clarity, focus, structure and transparent analysis.

Research on the role of discourse in teaching and learning in higher education has tended to draw on the work of various postmodern theorists, such as Gee (1999) and others of the New Literacy Studies movement. Critical realism is a relative newcomer to practitioners

in the arena of teaching and learning, with the work of Clegg (2003, 2009) and Kahn (2009) being examples. For this reason, the perspectives it can offer are either widely unknown or not well understood.

This paper then concurs with Trowler's (2009) stance on the importance of theory to empirical research in higher education. In the research project examples drawn upon here, critical realism was chosen as an appropriate theory as it provides an ontological framework for exploring facets of social reality. It illuminates reality, as it insists on a multi-faceted conceptualisation of reality in social science theorising. It also provides a comprehensive framework for research because, as Danermark, Ekström, Jakobsen and Karlsson (2002: 1) explain, critical realism as a meta-theory is not a homogenous social science movement, but includes a variety of perspectives and developments that relate to social science research practices. It thus offers the advantage of drawing on knowledge and insights from other positions while offering an alternative and additional meta-perspective on these. Importantly too, whilst Trowler (2009: 5) concludes by cautioning against allowing 'one's professional identity to become bound by a particular theory...', critical realism enables researcher positionality to be made explicit, acknowledging that it is not possible for the researcher to stand outside of the research (Sayer, 1992).

'Educational research is itself educational. The researcher is as much a learner as those who form the subject matter of the research' (Scott, 2000: 2) and yet must be mindful that whilst being an 'insider' and having some understanding of the participants' context, this cannot be reduced to 'a source of hunches or hypotheses about why actions occur' (Sayer, 1992: 37).

Trowler (2009: 5) argues that 'good theory' attempts to 'span the levels of analysis' or in critical realist terms, causal levels. Indeed, the multi-dimensional perspective of critical realism stems from the fact that, whereas empirical social science research focuses on surface events, critical realism focuses on the mechanisms that generate the empirical events and experiences. This is because, according to Bhaskar (1978), there is an ontological distinction between three levels, or domains, of reality: the empirical level, the actual, and the real or causal level. The empirical level is the point at which we experience

or observe a phenomenon and therefore develop a form of understanding about it. The actual level is where all events, whether or not 'activated', and thus experienced, are generated. However, it is the last domain that is of particular relevance to these studies and to their underpinning philosophy; this is the domain of the real, or causal level, where generative 'mechanisms' are situated that can result in change or 'events'. Such causal mechanisms may not be tangible or visible, but when they are activated, they result in events and produce 'tendencies', the consequence being that researchers seek to understand and explain these tendencies (Houston, 2001). The implication of this stratified ontology for the research discussed in this paper is that both projects were ultimately attempting to uncover the nature of the intangible causal mechanisms that were generating the complex phenomena evident at the empirical level.

In their analysis, the researchers were also guided by other significant critical realist perspectives, for example its non-conflationary stance regarding culture, structure and agency (Bhaskar, 1978) such that, while each may influence the others, they do not determine them. Critical realism's position on knowledge and language (Sayer, 1992) was also significant, particularly as the studies were concerned with discourse in higher education.

This critical realist orientation towards reality in general - and social reality in particular - thus implies a tendency for critical realist research to recognise complexity and differential practice with regard to the development of discourses in higher education. It thus provides a broad way of thinking and understanding that informs empirical research, but allows the construction of specific theories to emerge from the research topic (Cruickshank, 2007: 3, Danermark *et al.*, 2002: 162). Thus this paper will explicate the key aspects of critical realism that informed the ideological assumptions embedded in the research aims and objectives, the design and process, and the analytical lens of each project.

The paper will conclude by supporting the stance taken by Trowler (2009) and summarising the way in which the explicit application of critical realism enabled the two

exemplar research projects to tame ‘wicked issues’. Situating critical realism throughout the research processes allowed coherent linkages, analysis of relationships and construction of ‘an explanatory narrative of the social process(es)’ within academic communities (Nash, 2002: 398) to emerge from both studies.

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